London 10 April 1844

SIR :—

Although your duties as Township Superintendent of Common Schools are pointed out by the Statute, it is not improbable that obstacles may present themselves to you in the performance of these duties. I have therefore taken the liberty to offer you a few suggestions, and you will have the goodness to consider them as intended rather in the light of friendly hints, than as official recommendations.

And first as regards school divisions. You will find most people more anxious to have a school near, than a better one at a greater distance, and thus, the prevailing feeling will be to have numerous schools. If the remuneration to teachers were the same, whether the schools were numerously or thinly attended, there could be no objection to an indefinite number of schools; but as in the present arrangement the salaries of teachers depend upon the number attending each school, it becomes important to have schools as large as possible. Good teachers naturally expect schools, respectable in point of number and remuneration. In making your divisions, therefore, you will, as far as circumstances permit, try to obtain as large a number of scholars as possible. You will no doubt find your intentions in this respect opposed by the anxiety of those interested, in having schools very near their own houses, but you will try to reason and convince, and where this fails, it may be necessary to interpose your authority to carry the point, where it is clearly necessary, and where the inhabitants do not agree. The exercise of positive authority, however, should seldom be resorted to, unless to counteract absolute perverseness or gross selfishness.

And secondly, as regards the qualification of teachers. In your choice of them, it may be necessary to propose to yourself a higher standard both as respects character and attainments, than has usually been required. It has not unfrequently happened, that teachers have been employed who were vicious, ill-tempered, and profane. Wherever this has been the case, you ought to reject them, unless you have sufficient reason to believe that sincere endeavours of amendment are entertained. In point of attainment different degrees may suit different neighbourhoods, although on broad principles, the worst neighbourhoods should have the best teachers. The usual qualifications should embrace reading, writing, arithmetic, geography, English grammar, and book-keeping by single entry. And in your certificate you will please state the individual branches which the Candidate is capable of teaching, and thus those engaging him, will know what they have to expect. Much care must be exercised in granting certificates, so that no one will appear capable of doing more than he really can. In conducting your examinations you will of course be guided by a spirit of candor and consideration. A very competent person may be easily puzzled and confused, and you will frequently find a simple question produce embarrassment, where a little tact may restore confidence, and set the candidate at perfect ease.—Mere profession of attainment, cannot be relied upon; you will therefore find it safer and more satisfactory to put it to the test, for, generally speaking, the more modest and diffident are the best qualified. Wherever any case occurs in which you doubt the propriety of granting a certificate, you will have the goodness to refer the teacher to the County Superintendent, and in all cases where a certificate is refused on grounds affecting the character of the candidate, you will report the name of the person and the cause of such refusal, lest the same person, being otherwise qualified, should afterwards apply to the County Superintendent and obtain a certificate from him.

Teachers will frequently come to you with complaints which you have neither power nor authority to remedy, and indeed the complaints themselves may admit of no other remedy, than the soothing of a ruffled and wounded spirit. In such cases you must use all your tact to soothe and quiet the complainer. The very dependence a teacher is frequently made to feel, makes him jealous of his dignity and tenacious of his rights. As soon as the schools are in operation it is my intention to address the Trustees and Teachers, on the subject of these several duties, and I will esteem it a favor if you will carry into effect as far as in you lies, such of these suggestions as may meet your own approval. We all of course have separate and independent duties to perform, but by active co-operation and mutual suggestion much may be done which could not otherwise be effected.

As a number of new school houses may be erected before I have an opportunity of writing to the several Trustees, I beg leave to mention one matter to you which more properly belongs to them, namely, the erection of school houses. These should, in my opinion, be well situated, properly arranged and lighted, and moderately heated. The situation should be high and at least dry, and not in the vicinity of stagnant water. It will be found on consideration, that school houses should front the South East, and be lighted from the North East and North West sides, for the following reasons:—Intense light not only produces fatigue, but it injures the sight. Windows in the South and West sides admit too much light both in summer and winter, and in the warm season the heat becomes oppressive, but if the windows are in the north east and north west sides only, neither of these inconveniences will be felt. The door only should open to the south east, and the south west side being opposite the lightest and hottest direction, should have neither door nor window in it. The ceiling should never be lower than ten feet in a buildingof 20 by 24 feet, and should be higher in proportion as the size increases. The windows, should be rather numerous than large, say two windows of 12 lights 10 × 12, with a circular top, in each of the two lighted sides. The outside appearance may thus be sacrificed by having the building not at right angles with the roads, and by not having lights on two sides, but the internal comfort will make ample amends for these seeming irregularities. Then the internal arrangement should be such that the whole school should be under the teacher's eye. To accomplish this, let low forms or seats from 9 to 12 inches high be provided with a back, for the smaller scholars, from 5 to 10, and other forms from 12 to 18, for scholars from 10 to 16 years of age. Every child in sitting should have his feet on the ground, otherwise the circulation in his feet and legs will be stopped, and pain and uneasiness produced, and study made irksome. Let the low seats with the younger scholars be in front, the high ones behind. The writing desks may with great convenience be placed along the two lighted sides of the house, about 3 feet from the wall; thus leaving a passage, and enabling the scholars to sit with their backs to the light fronting the teacher. If the door be placed in the south east side and open from the right hand, the teacher's desk or table be may placed toward the south west side; there he will see the whole school and observe, without effort, all who come in and go out. In winter the heat should not exceed 70 degrees, and may be allowed to fall to 60 before the school is dismissed; and great attention should be paid to this, and a cheap thermometer be provided for every school. The very circumstance of attention to this and a little management and care to effect it, will not be without its moral influence as part of the discipline of the school.

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